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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine how recent demand for greater realism in portrayals of Irish life in the television and film industries serves to authenticate existing stereotypes and romantic images which characterize "Irishness" in the popular imagination rather than refute or undermine them. Discussions of a political thriller coproduced for television and an independent sector film production illustrate that conformation to the classical realist narrative which audiences have come to expect of mainstream Hollywood cinema lends a naturalistic credibility to the romanticism of "stage-Irishry." A discussion of these works offers some interesting pointers for dependent nations, like Ireland, or oppressed groups within society, who are intent on challenging a tradition of myth and misrepresentation. (36 end notes) (CGD)

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IS THE PRICE RIGHT?: STEREOTYPES, CO-PRODUCTION POLICY AND IRISH TELEVISION

Paper presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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Abstract of Paper for International Television Studies Conference

IS THE PRICE RIGHT?: STEREOTYPES, CO-PRODUCTION POLICY AND IRISH TELEVISION.

The Price, a six-part political thriller, is the most successful example of a co-production between Irish Television (RTE) and a foreign company, in this case Channel 4. Such was its popularity in the U.K. that it not only consistently topped Channel 4's ratings but at one point actually doubled the station's share of the national audience.

At a time when the growth of a native Irish film industry is accompanied by calls for greater realism in portrayals of Irish life, and a break with the myths and caricatures of the past, the screening of The Price raises a number of important questions about what form commercially viable representations of Ireland might take. Certainly The Price has no difficulty conforming to the kind of classical realist narrative which audiences have come to expect of mainstream, Hollywood cinema. The problem is that in the case of dependent countries such as Ireland, with an overriding colonial history, audiences have also come to expect a repertoire of stereotypes and romantic images which characterize 'Irishness' in the popular imagination.

By examining some key motifs in The Price in the light of previous popular images of political violence in Ireland, I hope to show that a desire for greater realism serves not to 'refute', or undermine, existing stereotypes, but in fact authenticates them, lending them a new 'naturalistic' credibility. The need to reconcile conflicting commercial imperatives of romanticism and realism results in the worst rather than the best of both worlds. As against this, film-makers in Ireland operating in the independent production sector have eschewed this approach and have sought an alternative means of combatting forms of 'stage-Irishry'. The recent work of film-makers such as

Pat Murphy indicates that successful initiatives may be undertaken in this area without losing contact with popular audiences. As such, a discussion of their work offers some interesting pointers for dependent nations, or indeed oppressed groups within society, who are intent on challenging a tradition of myth and misrepresentation.

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"They order a book as they would their breeches."

-Charles Lever (1806 - 1872), popularizer of the stage-Irishman, writing about his English publishers.

The Price, a six-part political thriller screened in January and February 1985, is the most successful example of a co-production between Irish television (RTE) and a foreign television station, in this case Channel 4 in the UK.(1) It not only received a nomination for best drama series/serial in the annual BAFTA awards, but also proved to be a lucrative commercial venture. It was one of five programmes included in Channel 4's NAPTE listings, one of the shop windows for international sales, and by the end of 1985 had been sold to broadcasting companies in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Portugal, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Gibralter and as far afield as Zimbabwe, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Swaziland. Even more encouraging for Channel 4's marketing executives, it took the station's audience ratings out of the doldrums and for the first time captured a mass television audience on a regular basis. On four occasions during its six-week screening period it topped the station's audience ratings, coming second in the two remaining weeks.

There, however, the success story ends, at least for Irish television viewers. For while The Price was gathering all the accolades in Britain, it was fighting for survival on Irish television. In the first week it did not figure at all in RTE's published ratings, notwithstanding extensive advance publicity and

a cover story in the weekly broadcasting magazine The RTE Guide. From then on, it struggled in the lower reaches of the 'top ten', levelling out at sixth or seventh in the ratings.(2) Though it may have helped RTE to make its mark at an international level, domestic audiences did not seem to recognize themselves in the image of Ireland promoted by the series. More than any other programme, it exemplifies the problems inherent in co-productions, particularly between a dependent and an economically dominant partner. Self-images tend to become incarcerating images when the power of self-appraisal is transferred to the hands of another.

RTE's involvement in co-productions began in 1978, and since then the station has participated in twelve major co-production projects. These have ranged from a twelve-part historical documentary (Ireland: A Television History) to the much acclaimed single play, The Ballroom of Romance.(3) The most attractive vehicle for co-production agreements, however, has been the expensive mini-series. RTE itself took the initiative in this area in 1979-80 through its adaptation of James Plunkett's epic novel about the Dublin lock-out of 1913, Strumpet City.(4) This was funded entirely within RTE but its success in overseas sales, recouping its £1m production costs by 1982, paved the way for more ambitious productions of this kind, inevitably bringing with it the prospect of co-production deals. The first of these was The Year of the French, co-produced in 1982 with the French channel FR3 and Channel 4 in Britain. This was followed by The Irish R.M. and Caught in a Free State, both with Channel 4, and a number of single plays, including four Irish Love Stories, again with Channel 4.

It is interesting to note that while the indigenous series Strumpet City, and the single play, attempted to question with varying degrees of success the conventional images of Ireland on the screen, the mini-series was gradually drawn in the other direction. The success of The Irish R.M., based on the 'comic drollery' of Somerville and Ross's original stories, did not bode well for the future, all the more so when the series began to improvise on the original material and slip, so to speak, into a stage-Irish version of banana-skin humour. This at least had the saving grace of comedy but even this was dissipated when the co-production policy finally got around to dealing with the current political situation in Ireland. The result was The Price, a series which set a new precedent in that for the first time, the complete team of writer, producer and director were outside immediate Irish control.(5)

Realism through a glass darkly.

The Price returns to well-trodden ground in dramatic treatments of the 'Troubles' in Ireland on film or television. A wealthy English businessman Geoffrey Carr (Peter Barkworth) comes to Ireland with his young wife Frances (Harriet Walter) and her daughter by a previous marriage. No sooner have his wife and daughter ventured into the wild Irish countryside than they are kidnapped by a maverick IRA gang, led by Frank Crossan (Derek Thompson) and his girlfriend Kate (Aingeal Grehan). Thereafter, the plot follows a familiar pattern: the rational world of high-tech and high finance (Geoffrey Carr is a computer tycoon) is pitted against the dark forces of terrorism and the Irish countryside (not always

distinguishable from each other, as we shall see). The hapless Irish police are caught somewhere in the middle between these adversaries, and an additional complication is introduced by a sexual entanglement between the IRA kidnapper, Frank Crossan, and Frances, his victim. This affair is precipitated by a grisly incident in which Frances's finger is cut off and sent to her husband as a reminder to pay up the ransom - 'the Price' - of £3m.

It was ironically the sexual scenes, and not the violence, which drew the wrath of some of the more voiciferous critics of the series in Ireland. In a leading article in a provincial newspaper, City Councillor and ex-Mayor of Galway Bridie O'Flaherty lashed out at RTE, conveniently ignoring the fact that The Price was a co-production:

> RTE should be ashamed of themselves for screening a programme such as The Price. It is totally unreal and gives an untrue picture of Irish society to any foreigners who see the programme .... This programme is just a typical Irish production (sic), full of filthy language and disgusting scenes. Is it not possible to have an Irish production without having the bad language and scenes where a mother makes love to her kidnapper while her daughter is present?(6)

The lack of realism and the tendency to fall back on exaggeration and stereotypes, was a constant theme in Irish responses to the series. Dissatisfaction was expressed particularly at the notorious episode in which grandmothers were portrayed as the main cause of Irish violence (of which more later), and also at the caricature of the Irish police whose primitive methods bordered at times on the antics of the Keystone Cops. "We may be a bit slow to get out of bed in the morning in this country," wrote one commentator, "but we are hardly as stupid as we are made out to be in this

series."(7) The general hostility felt towards The Price was expressed most forcefully by Fintan O'Toole, drama critic of The Sunday Tribune, in an in-depth review which charged RTE with abdicating its responsibilities as a public service broadcasting station in screening the series. O'Toole correctly imputed the deficiencies in the programme to RTE's adoption of a co-production policy which is "putting the very scarce resources of the national broadcasting corporation into creating images of Ireland over which the station has no editorial control". The patent inaccuracies in the programme's depiction of Irish life were intrinsically bound up with this co-production policy:

> Because it was so concerned with putting forward a view of Ireland which would meet the requirements of the English viewing public, The Price was an appalling thriller. The thriller as a genre stands or falls on authenticity, on the ability to convince the reader or the viewer that what it depicts can and could happen, and in the way that is shown.(8)

Yet at this point the question needs to be raised: was The Price lacking in authenticity, and was its dramatic appeal impaired by the implausibility of the events which it portrayed? For many people, the difficulty with The Price is that it was far too close to reality for comfort. The advance publicity was at pains to point out that the story was based on a real-life kidnapping in Sardinia, but did not overlook either the striking similarity with recent political events in Ireland. Describing the light-hearted atmosphere during the filming of The Price, the TV Times remarked:

> Only towards the end of production, when news was announced that Irish (sic) supermarket chain executive Don Tidey had been seized from his car and was being held for a £5 million ransom, did the mood momentarily become sombre. Tidey was rescued three weeks later, however - and on The Price the joking resumed.(9)

The joking, however, ceased when during the screening period in

January and February, at least two kidnappings in Ireland were directly attributed to the series. A mother and her four-year old daughter were kidnapped in Limerick, and the kidnapping of a woman in Northern Ireland made national headlines when the husband of the woman alleged that The Price had contributed to his wife's abduction. "Such programmes give people wrong ideas and should not be shown", he said, calling for the scrapping of the series.(10) RTE's official spokesperson dismissed these allegations out of hand, but even Harriet Walter, who played the fictional kidnap victim, was brought into the controversy. "It's like blaming Shakespeare for every murder committed since he wrote Macbeth", she claimed. "When we were filming in Ireland there were at least three kidnaps. It's something that goes on anyway."(11) This acrimonious debate was rekindled a year later when Peter Barkworth felt obliged to absolve The Price of all responsibility for the kidnapping of Jennifer Guinness, the wife of a wealthy Dublin businessman, in April 1986. "Of course, I'm horrified", he said in a statement to the press:

> There are some dreadful parallels with The Price. I would like to think that these kidnappers did not watch it on television and then go out a year later and emulate it .... In the end you just have to accept that fiction must echo fact.(12)

It would seem then that a surfeit rather than a lack of authenticity was one of the basic problems which beset The Price. Its apparent fidelity to 'real life' was further underlined by stories in the press which reported that a Garda (i.e. police) escort had to accompany the transportation of guns to the set, and another story which noted on "one account, at least, it is one hundred per cent authentic. Some of the Gardai portrayed are

actually real live Gardai".(13) The idiosyncratic television critic of The Irish Times, Brendan Glacken, even found it possible to extend the realism of the series to its main characters, accusing it of getting "bogged down in psychology": "The Price is of course intent on creating credible characters - quite successfully so far, if one excludes the mad Republican granny".(14)

The attempts to establish the authenticity or credibility of The Price might appear at first sight to be incompatible with the claims that it did little more than recycle some of the oldest stereotypes in representations of Ireland. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that these positions are not irreconcilable: indeed it may even be that they complement and reinforce one another. As Edward Said has shown in his study of Orientalism, the difficulty with colonial stereotypes may not be that of mis-representation , but rather that they aspire to a realist mode of representation.(15) Realistic devices in the depiction of oriental life such as the detached (though omniscient) narrator; the emphasis on naturalistic 'authenticating' details; the search for narrative cohesion and closure, and above all the need to attain a clear transparent view of a threatening culture, to have direct and unmediated access without any kind of involvement - all of these serve to gloss over and legitimate many of the crudest stereotypes of the Middle East. Nowhere was the collusion between realism and colonialism more apparent than in the visual arts. Thus the organizer of a recent exhibition on Orientalism in painting can state that "The unifying characteristic of nineteenth-century Orientalism was its attempt at documentary realism", and then go on in the same breath to declare that "the

flowering of Orientalist painting ... was closely associated with the apogee of European colonial expansion in the nineteenth century."(16)

As in the case of its Orientalist counterparts, the popular appeal of The Price, particularly with viewers in Britain, may not be unrelated to the fact that it lent a semblance of documentary realism to some of the most ingrained prejudices about political violence in Ireland. As Patrick Stoddart put it in Broadcast, one of the main 'trade' magazines:

> Few serials have had the power or the immediacy [of The Price] .... The whole dismal affair has been played out with great pace and intensity, made all the more realistic by the use of Irish actors, largely unknown to British television, to play the local roles.(17)

While contemporary press accounts and attendant publicity may have sought to link The Price unproblematically with the real world, it derived its dramatic force not from its correspondence with actual events but from a silent, unacknowledged relationship to some of the classic (and hackneyed) representations of Ireland on the screen. Thus, for example, one of the key portrayals of the IRA as psychotic gunmen is in the appropriately entitled Shake Hands with the Devil (1959), in which James Cagney stars as an IRA leader who is a leading surgeon by day, but a ruthless killer at night. The central action of the film revolves around the kidnapping of a young upper class English woman, Jennifer Curtis (Dana Wynter), and is structured as follows:

(i) She leaves an imposing mansion in the Irish countryside.

(ii) She is driven through wild landscape, recognizably that of the Wicklow mountains.

(iii) She is kidnapped at a bogus road-block by IRA gunmen disguised as roadworkers.

(iv) Her guard/driver is shot dead in cold blood.

(v) She is injured/mulitated but despite (or because of?) this, falls in love with one of her captors.

This sequence of events is duplicated in The Price, right down to the use of the Wicklow mountains as a picturesque location. The Price, however, improves noticeably on its predecessor in that it injects a new sense of realism into the kidnapping scene, the deployment of a hand-held camera, for instance, adding a current-affairs type credibility to the incident. (In a similar fashion, the final stamp of authenticity was put on the dramatization of the kidnapping of the racehorse Shergar by inserting after the final credits an actual recording of the voice of one of the original kidnappers.) This kind of verisimilitude does not bring us any closer to an understanding of the political complexities of paramilitary violence, but in The Price merely lends a naturalistic veneer to what is one of the oldest stereotypes of political violence in Ireland, namely, that it has something to do with the wildness of the Irish landscape and the effects of an unpredictable natural environment on the volatile Irish character. This explanation of the more wayward traits of Irish character was particularly attractive to Victorian travellers. Passing through the untamed landscape of Kerry in the 1840s, for instance, William Thackeray was led to exclaim:

> I don't know how it is, but throughout the country the men and the landscapes seem to be the same, and one and the other seem ragged, ruined and cheerful.(18)

Another English commentator was even more direct, describing Kerry as being

> All acclivity and declivity, without the intervention of a single horizontal plane; the mountains all rocks, and the men all savages.(19)

In the third episode of The Price, one of the breakaway IRA

group, Ronan (James Bartley), tries to kill the young boy who witnessed the kidnapping. The sequence opens on a bleak mountainside as the camera pans slowly from the desolate cottage in which the boy is staying to a large rock behind which lurks the IRA sniper. The subsequent attempt on the boy's life fails as a flock of sheep distracts the gunman while he is taking aim, but later in the episode he is again, as the trailer the previous week put it, "in the mountains ... stalking his prey". Once more he takes refuge behind a rock, blending in with the scenery while the boy is fishing with a Special Branch detective. The assassin moves stealthily through the landscape to get closer to his target and takes aim from another rock. A gunshot rings out, but when the camera homes in on the victim, we see it is the gunman himself who has been taken by surprise by another detective. In the final shot of the sequence, the IRA man's body floats aimlessly on the water, indistinguishable from the rocks in the stream. Not a word is spoken by him throughout the entire episode: the only sign that he is human is in the previous episode when he delivers a few lines while helping himself to a bottle of whiskey. In this earlier scene, incidentally, he is expressly forbidden by Frank Crossan to harm the boy. Yet once he is left alone on the wild, foreboding landscape, the hidden nature of the Irish character gets the better of him and he is driven inexorably towards violence.

In an interview given during the run-up to the screening of The Price, Peter Ransley, the writer of the series, admitted that he had not been to Ireland before he started working on the story. "We had the option of shooting it in Sardinia", he told The Sunday Tribune:

> Against that, however, a number of series had been set there for the beautiful scenery. I was much more interested in setting it in Ireland. England and Ireland are part of the same culture.(20)

If England and Ireland share the same cultures, and yet there are irreconcilable differences between them, it is safe to conclude that nature must be at the root of the conflict. Instead of shooting the series in Sardinia "for the beautiful scenery", the location of the story was switched to Ireland where again the beautiful scenery presided over the action. It need hardly be said that there is no sense of place in this view of landscape. The Irish countryside is divested of all its specific social and historical resonances, and is transformed into a kind of generalized nature in keeping with the idea that violence has little to do with social and political structures. As Peter Barkworth himself put it:

> OK, it takes place in Ireland, and everybody knows what goes on there, knows the facts of the politics, the violence and the murder. If we had delved into that it would have dominated the series. So it was necessary to be apolitical, and our kidnapping is purely a criminal act for personal gain.(21)

It is not even clear that The Price succeeds in reducing politics to acts undertaken for personal gain in the traditional Hollywood manner, for it is difficult to show personal motivation when no personality or psychological complexity exists in the first place. An attempt is made at one point to invest Frank's character with psychological depth by linking his initiation into the republican movement with his personal development in the form of his childhood experiences. No sooner has this been introduced, however, than it relapses into one of the most potent sources of stereotyping, that of biological explanations. In the scene in

question, Frances Carr asks Frank how he entered the republican movement. Frank explains that as a child his mother would not let him throw stones at 'the Brits' until one night, when he was twelve, his father was systematically brutalized and humiliated by the army. "That night", he continues, "it was the week before Bloody Sunday, I was allowed to throw stones". This might sound plausible as a biographical anecdote but in the overall context of the story, the guiding influence of the mother here is foreshadowed by an earlier scene in which the much criticized 'republican grandmother' makes her appearance. The grandmother's main purpose in life, it would seem, is to persuade her impressionable grandson Kevin, the young boy who witnessed the kidnapping, not to inform on the kidnappers. We see her leafing slowly through an old photograph album while she invokes in a dreary monotone the memory of her husband who was killed during the War of Independence:

> They all came to bury him, Tom Barry, Dan Breen, Ernie O'Malley, and it's still going on you see, and it will go on, he used to say, until Ireland is all one, from sea to sea.

She then proceeds to add a supernatural note by warning the young boy that her husband will rise from the grave should he ever inform on the republican movement!

The idea that republicanism is not a political ideology but is something transmitted genetically from mother to son (with a little bit of help from the Catholic Church) is taken up again in a later scene in which the three detectives investigating the kidnapping are viewing a film taken by police at an IRA funeral. This short film is a remarkable exercise in surveillance for in the space of a few frames, it manages to crystallize all the most popular myths about republicanism. At first a coffin is shown

draped in a tricolour; then a priest, followed by the mandatory republican mother. The mother (this time complete with dark glasses) dominates the frame while a volley of shots is fired in the background over the grave. The police camera follows the paramilitary colour party as they make their getaway, and when one of them removes his balaclava, we see that it is Frank Crossan - "the family man" as one of the detectives remarks cynically. Frank's atavistic politics are an extension of the family, part of the inherited mystique of Irish republicanism. This scene, with its conflation of myth and 'actuality' footage, is emblematic of the overall approach to Ireland adopted by The Price. As Niall McCarthy, RTE's Head of Drama and one of the most outspoken defenders of The Price, remarked about the caricatures which arise from co-productions: "If the distortion becomes so gross as to be unbelievable, we wouldn't get involved."(22) Stereotypes, it would seem, are acceptable as long as they are convincing and appear to be true to life.

Colonial stereotypes or native myths?

It would be easy to portray this as a form of colonial stereotyping imposed on Irish and international audiences by a British production company. Yet this overlooks the fact that The Price was a co-production and already had RTE's unreserved seal of approval. As Peter Barkworth explains: "RTE's enthusiasm made it seem, well, all right. I think if they had been scared we would have had second thoughts, might even have abandoned the project."(23) At one level, the drive towards a generalized view of landscape and character, emptied of all social characteristics, is consistent with a perceived need to package Irish history and politics for an international 'mass' audience. In a revealing comment, the recent Stokes Kennedy Crowley Report on RTE observed

that

> Sales of home produced programmes are difficult to achieve due to problems of language, accent and understanding of Irish environment and history, particularly in Continental Europe and the USA.(24)

Faced with these 'impediments', the temptation is undoubtedly to cancel out social differences, to deny the specific features of language, landscape and history so that they are instantly intelligible to international consumers. This would seem to be the thinking which informs Peter Ransley's statement, quoted above, that England and Ireland are part of the same culture, a view seemingly which is also shared by John Baragwanath, Head of Co-Production and Programme sales at RTE. Referring to what is in reality a highly unequal relationship between RTE and British television, Baragwanath remarks:

> a free flow of trade is starting to develop between the two countries. If we spend several millions on the U.K., we expect Britain to spend money on our programmes too. It's all a matter of fair trading. I see the two countries as sister islands.(25)

It is precisely 'realism', with its apparent immediacy and its emphasis on rendering the world directly accessible to the detached outsider, which masks cultural and social difference. However, it is important to realize that these simplifying myths are not just the preserve of outsiders or external interests but may also have a native currency over and above RTE's programming policy. The grandmother episode in The Price, for instance, may be seen at one level as another example of the kind of crude explanation of political violence offered by a character in Douglas Hurd's novel Vote to Kill (written, incidentally, before his appointment as Secretary of State in Northern Ireland):

> grandmothers were at the root of the trouble in Ireland .... They keep them at home, the Catholics,I mean. No question of old people's homes. So they sit there by the fire, night after night...spreading all the old lies. That's why the different kinds of Irish go on hating each other.(26)

Yet before this is dismissed as an offensive caricature, it is worthwhile remembering that one of the most powerful mobilizing images in the nationalist call to arms has been precisely that of an old woman, whether she takes the form of the Hag of Beare, the Shan Van Vocht (the poor old woman), or, the most important for our purposes, Cathleen ni Houlihan, who, in Yeats' famous play, changes from being an 'old crone' into a beautiful young woman as soon as a young man is willing to lay down his life for her. It is hardly a coincidence that Kate is the name of Frank Crossan's ruthless female accomplice in The Price. At the end of the first episode, she also completes the transformation from mother role to femme fatale by attempting to kill the young boy who witnessed the crime, while Frank - 'the family man' - is not prepared to shoot.

It can be conceded that The Price, with its pretensions to realism, is merely an identikit version of this traditional myth, and possesses none of the dramatic force of its nationalist precursors. Yet it says something for the power of the culture industry that in the present Northern conflict, the pulp fiction equivalents of The Price may often sustain those at the heart of the struggle. Thus in a first hand account of life in the H-Blocks, an ex-prisoner relates that

> There is a lot of religion in the Blocks. No Marxism. No way. They never miss the Rosary every night in Gaelic. Gaelic prayers are a great way of learning Irish. Then you have stories and songs. Some of the memories are fantastic. One man, Bobby Sands, memorised Trinity by

> Leon Uris. That took eight days to tell. The spirit is fantastic.(27)

This anecdote shows how difficult it is at times to distinguish between stereotypes imposed by an external source, and the self-images of a nationalist tradition. In particular, it suggests that so far from undermining native culture, transnational communication networks may often help to perpetuate some of the most mythic forms of national identity. This is perhaps what Armand Mattelart and his colleagues have in mind when they argue that an uncritical defence of national identity is no longer a sufficient reason for opposing cultural imperialism, since

> Cultural identity [itself may be] reduced to a national label stuck on what is essentially a transnational copy. A large number of television series, for example, have fallen into this trap. Admittedly the stories may be based on the national past, or real historical situations, but the general narrative style is still that of the big television empires. In the process, cultural identity becomes picturesque folklore.(28)

Co-productions are the perfect vehicle for bringing about this form of hybrid culture. Though aimed primarily at overseas markets, their domestic base gives them the semblance of home productions. Only those elements of indigenous culture which signify 'Irishness' in the most general and attenuated sense of the term are taken into consideration. The ensuing stereotypes may not be total impositions, but the 'guaranteed Irish' label, and the straining towards realistic effects, may pose an even greater threat to cultural self-determination. The type of stagnation and myth-making often associated with a national culture immersed in tradition is now produced by the international culture industry, locking dependent countries into immobilizing images of themselves.(29) This is not to say that cultures faced with this kind of absorption should opt out of the

international arena and take refuge in comforting notions of 'tradition', 'authenticity' or other essentialist forms of cultural identity. The fact that a national broadcasting service can put virtually all its dramatic resources into series such as The Price is sufficient grounds for questioning the idea of an unproblematic national culture. At a deeper level, the facility with which a hunger strike tradition, which its proponents trace back to the ancient Brehon laws, can merge in contemporary republicanism with the historical kitsch of Leon Uris' Trinity, throws into sharp relief the need for a critical engagement with the received images of cultural nationalism.

Counteracting images through indigenous production.

It is interesting to compare the representation of women and landscape in Pat Murphy's recent film Anne Devlin, produced within the independent film sector, with the formulaic abstractions of The Price. Though again drawing on the Wicklow countryside and its connections with insurgency, land in Anne Devlin is not reduced to scenery but is specifically located in place and time. In one key scene Julia (Bernie Downes), Anne Devlin's sister, is shown sitting on a gate, framed against the landscape while she slowly combs out her hair. In the background, a group of rebels led by Robert Emmet (Bosco Hogan) and Michael Dwyer (Niall O'Brien) emerge from hiding in the fields and approach the camera. This might appear to be another example of equating militant republicanism with the forces of nature but it is in fact nothing of the sort. According to local memory, combing out the hair in this fashion was a coded message to Michael Dwyer and his fellow insurgents that they could come out into the open: their appearance on the landscape is not natural but is socially mediated by a sign. The full significance of this act may not have been obvious to the outside

observer at the time, any more than it is to the unreflective cinemagoer today. But to those on the inside, those to whom Irish history is a vital concern, it adds along with other similar scenes an almost clandestine meaning to the film.

Throughout the film, the insider's view, with its densely embedded knowledge, is used not only to resist colonial occupation but also to question the romantic bravado of a male dominated, bourgeois nationalism. Anne Devlin's (Brid Brennan) silence and endurance seems to fall in with the traditional image of the suffering republican mother, but actually undermines it by repeatedly portraying Anne in artificial Pieta poses, thereby questioning the 'natural' basis of the stereotype. At the outset, Emmet agrees with Anne that her domestic status is an act, a subterfuge to mislead the British, but significantly Emmet's own nationalist associates forget that it is a role and begin to treat Anne as if that was her natural vocation. Though Anne never loses sight of the fact that her imperial masters are the source of her oppression, as the film progresses the lines between Emmet and his British adversaries, as represented by Major Sirr (Ian McElh become increasingly blurred. Anne's sense of being excluded from the conspiratorial world of Emmet's laboratory, with its intimidating display of scientific instruments, is echoed in a later scene when she finds herself in Major Sirr's study, again surrounded by artefacts, fossils and other objects of scientific enquiry. The strange underlying affinities between opposing sides in a male-dominated struggle is highlighted in one scene when Emmet shows Anne the imposing green uniform which he has commissioned for his rebel army. Anne says she doesn't care for uniforms. Emmet asks

why, gazing at his idealized image in a full-length mirror. Anne protests:

> They look like a green version of Redcoats' uniforms. We are ourselves. We should rebel as ourselves.

Anne is no less resolute in her opposition to colonial rule than Emmet and his co-conspirators but she realizes that there is an interior as well as an exterior struggle. Emmet is at a loss to understand how resistance against imperialism can be inspired by anything other than national identity. Anne, however, is under no such illusion. When Emmet pleads with her to turn him in to save her own life, she replies: "I will not swear one word against you. It was not for you we did it."

Though adhering to a seemingly straightforward narrative, Anne Devlin does not attempt to correct a tradition of stereotypes and misrepresentation by setting the record straight, and showing 'the realities' of Irish life. Instead the film recognizes that part of the ideological force of nationalism lies in its ability to appropriate myths for its own ends, inverting and transforming negative images (e.g. 'the republican granny') into positive symbols (e.g. the Cathleen no Houlihan figure) without questioning these stereotypes at a fundamental level. Whereas The Price simplifies stereotypes to make them palatable for international consumption, Anne Devlin is addressed primarily to an Irish audience imbued with the folk memory of Emmet and Anne Devlin. That it can do so is not unrelated to the fact that it is the first feature length film on this scale to be funded entirely within Ireland. In The Price, it is the introduction of the new communications technologies into Ireland, in the form of Geoffrey Carr's advanced computer systems, which brings about a resolution of the

narrative. In Anne Devlin, it is precisely Emmet's dabbling in new scientific technology, abstracted from contemporary social and political conditions, which brings about his downfall.(30)

The future of both television and film production in Ireland turns on their relationship to the new technologies, and by extension to international image markets. This is readily apparent in the recent Stokes Kennedy Crowley (SKC) Report on RTE which, in its eagerness to bring cost-efficiency to bear on the national broadcasting service, recommended the breaking up of the monopoly of in-house production. In its place, the Report recommended that, on the one hand, "The use of Co-Production should be extended to the widest possible range of programmes",(31) and, on the other hand, that more opportunities be provided for the independent production sector, following Channel 4's lead in this area. These are not prioritized but clearly the existing dynamic within RTE tends towards co-productions. Within a month of the screening of The Price, RTE announced three more co-production deals with British partners. As the protracted internal debate within RTE on these future options indicates,(32) an emphasis on overseas sales and co-productions is often presented as the result of a hard-nosed business acumen. Yet, as the SKC Report itself points out, overseas sales of RTE programmes have been so disappointing that it is not possible "to rely on a significant increase in revenue from programme sales until home-produced drama and features programmes increase in volume".(33)

The problem with exporting programmes does not lie with overseas audiences as such but in tailoring indigenous production to meet the needs of powerful foreign 'partners'. This does not

necessarily mean, as has often been assumed, that national characteristics are obliterated and transformed into a standardized, mid-Atlantic culture. If anything, the reverse situation holds: national characteristics are taken as given, and are treated as eternal verities immune to changes in time and circumstance. The fact that The Price could be switched at will from Sardinia to Ireland is part of the problem but this is not to say that the universalizing thrust of such programmes takes us beyond nationalism. This indeed might have its liberating aspects, but the drive towards universalization works in the opposite direction. National traits are wrested from their specific political and historical contexts and conferred with a natural permanence, whether it takes the guise of landscape, biology or whatever. It is this restrictive universality which lends itself to co-productions and, of course, to the formation of national stereotypes. The dislocations in the historical process are denied so that romantic forms of nationalism, which rest on myths of tradition and organic cohesion, discover an unexpected afterlife in the new communications order. The recourse to nature, however 'authentic', can always accommodate outsiders: indeed the absence of social engagement was a precondition of the romantic experience of nature in the first place.(33)

The emergence of co-productions on a generalized scale marks a fundamental shift in debates about cultural imperialism. There is a sense in which the universal appeal of American popular culture in the 1930s to the 1950s may have had a beneficial effect upon the aspirations of subordinate groups within a dominant, all-embracing national culture. Thus, for example, the experience of urban alienation evoked in American detective fiction during its heyday in the 1930s struck a responsive chord with British working

class intellectuals labouring under the ideology of Monarchy and the Empire.(35) At a different level in Ireland, the endless dreams of romantic love promulgated by Hollywood was not just escapism but may have provided a release from a rigourist sexual morality and a marriage system bound up directly with economic calculation. Modern communications industries do not offer similar prospects of release: indeed where co-productions are concerned, they often shore up precisely those regressive aspects of national cultures which audiences were trying to escape from in previous years. In the British context, this means re-activating the delusions of imperial grandeur from the Victorian to the pre-World War II era. As a senior executive at the Mobil Corporation (one of the major investors in Masterpiece Theatre in the United States) puts it:

> We are urging the British to make more pieces from the 1930s period, like the Raj Quartet and Churchill, The Wilderness Years. This period works well for Americans.(36)

The dominant power blocs in the new communications order cannot but gain immeasurably from these reminders of bygone 'glories', but the same does not apply to those at the receiving end of cultural imperialism. The versions of the past which attract co-production deals to developing or dependent nations are invariably bound up with myths of inferiority and primitivism or, on a more positive but nonetheless problematic note, with anachronistic forms of romantic nationalism. These are the images of Ireland which The Price seeks to reinforce but which truly indigenous films like Anne Devlin are in a position to counteract. It is perhaps a coincidence that the amount of money demanded by the kidnappers from the foreign computer company in The Price -

£3 million - is exactly the same as the cost of the series. All that remains to be established then is: who is being held up to ransom?

NOTES

1. For an excellent account of RTE's controversial involvement in co-productions, see Paddy Woodworth, "The Price of Freedom: the Politics of Drama in RTE", Magill, 7 March 1985.

2. The Price did not figure at all in RTE's published ratings during its re-run early in 1986.

3. The Ballroom of Romance is discussed in Barbara O'Connor, "The Representation of Women in Irish Television Drama", in Martin McLoone and John MacMahon, (eds.), Television and Irish Society (Dublin: RTE/IFI, 1984). The limitations of Robert Kee's Ireland: A Television History are analysed in Bob Ferguson's monograph, Television on History: Representations of Ireland (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1985).

4. See Martin McLoone, "Strumpet City - The Urban Working Class on Irish Television", in McLoone and MacMahon, op. cit.

5. Irish writers, directors, producers and other personnel were employed in different combinations in earlier co-productions. The Love Stories project, produced by RTE's John Lynch, had full editorial control, thus suggesting that the single play enjoys considerably more autonomy that mini-series such as The Irish R.M. and The Price.

6. Connacht Sentinel, 12 February 1985. Perhaps Cllr. O'Flaherty's hostility towards RTE is not unrelated to the fact that she was banned from RTE the previous week for participating in a programme on a pirate radio station.

7. Pat Howley, "T.V Comment", Tuam Herald, 9 February 1985.

8. Fintan O'Toole, "The Price of Shame", The Sunday Tribune, 17 February 1985.

9. "Coming to Terms with Kidnapping", TV Times, 5-11 January 1985.

10. Evening Herald, 30 January 1985.

11. The Sunday Press, 10 February 1985.

12. Evening Press, 14 April 1986.

13. The Irish Times, 26 January 1985.

14. The Irish Times, 22 January 1985.

15. Edward Said, Orientalism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

16. Quoted in Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient", Art in America, May 1983, p. 119. Nochlin's article is a brilliant account of how realism contributes to stereotyping.

17. Patrick Stoddart, "The Price Gets Exactly Right", Broadcast, 15 February 1985.

18. William Thackeray, The Irish Sketch Book and Critical Reviews (1843:Reprint ed., London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1880), p. 128.

19. Lord Bellamount's description of Kerry, quoted by Thomas Moore in his Journal, 6 August 1823. See Lord J. Russel's edition of Moore's Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence (London: Longman, 1853).

20. Michael Dwyer, "RTE Hopes at £3m The Price is Right", The Sunday Tribune, 6 January 1985.

21. TV Times, 5-11 January 1985.

22. Quoted in Woodworth, op. cit.

23. TV Times, 5-11 January 1985.

24. Stokes · Kennedy Crowley, Review of Radio Telefis Eireann (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1985), p. 212.

25. Quoted in "TV Drama Debate Continues: RTE - 'Britain's biggest customer for programmes'", Access, December 1984. Access is RTE's in-house magazine.

26. Quoted in Alan Titley, "Rough Rug-Headed Kerns: The Irish Gunman in the Popular Novel", Eire-Ireland, XV, No. 4, Winter 1980, p. 21.

27. Quoted in Tim Pat Coogan, On the Blanket (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980), p. 4.

28. Armand Mattelart et al., International Image Markets: In Search of an Alternative Perspective, trans. David Buxton, (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1984), p. 18.

29. Thus, for example, Colin McArthur explains how the prospect of US sales led the producers of the Scottish television series, Scotland's Story, to place an undue emphasis on some of the more romantic aspects of Scottish history (e.g. the testimony of incumbent clan chiefs). See Colin McArthur, "Scotland's Story" Framework, No · 26-27, 1985.

30. I have discussed Anne Devlin at greater length in "The Politics of Silence", Framework (forthcoming).

31 Stokes Kennedy Crowley, op. cit., p. 39.

32. From July to December 1984, the RTE in-house magazine, Access, carried a series of extensive contributions on the

future of drama in RTE. The controversy was prompted by papers delivered at the Irish Film Institute/RTE Annual Summer School that year.

33. Stokes Kennedy Crowley, op. cit., p. 212. (My italics.)

34. This is one of the themes which informs Charles Rosen's and Henri Zerner's Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

35. See Ken Worpole, Dockers and Detectives (London: Verso, 1983), Ch. 2. For related observations, see Paul Willemen's interview with Armand and Michele Mattelart, Framework, No. 26-27, 1985.

36. Herb Schertz "Let Good People Get on With it", Broadcast, 11 January 1985. The attractions which 'prestige' drama holds for the image-building of corporations such as Mobil and Exxon is discussed in Carl Gardner and John Wyver, "The Single Play: From Reithian Reverence to Cost Accounting and Censorship", Screen, July-October 1983, Vol. 24, No. 4-5 pp. 119-20.